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The National League for Woman's Service

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Recommended Citation

Stieber, Lydia, "The National League for Woman's Service" (1998). *People and Places*. 16.
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The National League for Woman's Service

By: Lydia Stieber



Postcard of Little Wakefield

St. Mutien's Christian Brothers' Residence, located on La Salle University's South Campus, was once one of the busiest centers in Germantown. In 1917, this building was known as "Little Wakefield" and was a demonstration center for one of most active branches of the National League for Woman's Service. It was at this building that the women of Germantown held home economics classes, raised vegetables and cultivated bees in an effort to do their part for the nation during World War I.

Founded in January 1917 by a group of patriotic women with the sanction and cooperation of secretary of state James W. Wilson, the object of this organization was

to standardize the work of the women of America along the lines of constructive patriotism; to develop the resources and to promote the efficiency of women in meeting their every day responsibilities to home, to State, to nation and to humanity; to provide organized, trained groups in every community prepared to cooperate with the Red Cross and other agencies in dealing with any calamity, fire, flood, famine, economic disorder, etc., and in time of war to supplement the work of the Red Cross, the army and navy, and to deal the questions of woman's work and woman's welfare.

The Pennsylvania division of the League was to focus on social welfare, canteen work, home economics, motor driving, hospital entertainment, agriculture, signaling, map reading, wireless, and overseas relief, and also to concentrate efforts to help Belgium, Italy, Serbia, Poland, Russia, and the United States. The structure of the League was divided into highly specialized committees, such as the Overseas Committee, the Wool Committee, and other areas of concentrated efforts. The cafeteria service at the canteen was organized to great detail, such as the number of kitchen helpers and servers or who may be a volunteer or who needed to be an expert dietitian. These activities and endeavors were typical of the work done by the League. Philadelphia had its own League organization, and the first branch of this League was the Germantown Branch, founded April 28, 1917.

The Germantown branch of the National League for Woman's service originally used the YWCA buildings for its meetings, but called upon all the citizens, particularly the women, of Germantown to do their patriotic duty of behalf of the nation. Though the League established

areas for war gardens, the people of Germantown and the surrounding areas tilled almost every available plot of tractable land, using anything from the few square feet of someone's back yard to baseball grounds or golf courses for the growing of potatoes and beans.

The Germantown branch of the League, of which Mrs. James (Sarah) Starr of the Belfield estate was chairman at the time, had the idea of converting a place into a school where "women could learn preparedness of the kind Uncle Sam was most anxious for." In 1917, an institution and demonstration center of the League was located at "Little Wakefield," also known as the "old Fisher Mansion"; this building now stands on La Salle University's South Campus and is presently the St. Mutien's Christian Brothers' Residence. This demonstration center was a free school for high and normal school girls who boarded there for two weeks in groups of twelve, and in return worked from early morning until night planting and weeding gardens. At the time the demonstration center opened, four acres of vegetables had already been planted. The girls were said to "cut grass and make hay while the sun shines," in addition to receiving lessons in practical cooking, food conservation to reduce waste, and dietetics. The weekly lessons at this demonstration center mainly included canning and preserving on Mondays and Tuesdays, cooking on Wednesdays ("no dietetics or domestic science but good old-fashioned home cooking"), and garden demonstrations on Thursdays and Fridays. In addition to canning, home economics was taught on Tuesdays or Thursdays.

As the League grew, Fridays became a day for floral and bee culture. Miss Letitia Wright, the expert teacher in bee culture, stated that bee culture was of great fascination and value, not only to the students but to the nation, on account of the large demands for honey made constantly by France and England. In studying the bees, their hives, and honey making, the girls would wear wide straw hats, nets and high arm gloves. One carried a "smoker" and led the procession to the apiary (the place where bees are kept.)

Little Wakefield also became quite a focal point for the canning and preserving of food. After digging and planting vegetables on the land, the women needed to can and preserve the peas, beans, corn, cabbage, peaches and raspberries they'd been growing and tending. Lacking a drying machine, their method for drying consisted of spreading the peas and beans on clean sheets of paper and depending on the sun to dry the vegetables in a few hours' time. At the time, preservation of the peaches and raspberries was a procedure that many American women were familiar with, but the preserving of vegetables by canning and drying was introduced to them for the first time in the summer of 1917.



Early in 1918, the Junior Service Corps of the National League for Woman's Service formed with fifteen-year-old Sarah Logan Starr (daughter of chairman Mrs. James Starr) as lieutenant. They arranged for a dance to be given with the proceeds going to the wool committee of the League for the purchase of wool. Though the juniors did not participate in as many lessons and activities as the rest of the women of the League, they demonstrated that they too were capable of physical labor by clearing the sidewalks of a heavy snow before the Boy Scouts, who were supposed to do the task, arrived.

With further expansion of the League, the Woman's Club of Germantown "most patriotically" turned over their clubhouse to the National League for Woman's Service so that it could be used

as an activity center. This house was the Johnson House, located at Germantown and Washington Lane. The Johnson House was called the Service House, for the Woman's Club intended it to be a permanent community center for the duration of the war and to be used for civic work after the war. In order to solve food problems and provide efficient, trained workers, the lessons and cooking classes included the same basic schedule used at Little Wakefield, with classes every evening at 7:45. On Monday and Tuesday evenings there were classes in hospital dietetics and war cooking; on Wednesday, ten lessons on food values, introducing the principles of economical cooking; home economics on Thursdays; and on Friday, war cooking in the home. Furthermore, Mrs. Nellie M. Haines, who gave lessons at Little Wakefield in the summer of 1917, taught lessons every Friday afternoon at 2:45 for juniors. While there was no fee for these classes, a silver offering was asked to defray the cost of the materials.

The League moved once again to a larger house on Cheltenham Avenue and started sewing garments for French women and children. Talks were given with proceeds going to the fatherless children in France who were in great need of food. Also, women at this time made many babies' clothes because they assumed that there would be many illegitimate children whose fathers were soldiers. In 1918, the notion of giving support to these fatherless children was a rather progressive idea of the time, especially when one considers that the League consisted predominantly of the white upper-class women of Germantown. However, reducing child labor and achieving social justice for children was a major reform issue for progressive women of the day.

A social implication that was not particularly advanced at the time was the idea of patriotism, race, and nationality. Patriotism was basically a white, non-immigrant concept. Since July was "Italian month," the Germantown newspaper mentioned that one war hero was an Italian-American; that month flowers and baskets were sold with proceeds going to Italian refugees. Undoubtedly there was more than one Italian-American who fought in the war, and the Italian refugees probably needed aid for longer than one month. However, this rather small contribution was all that the people of the Woman's Club, the Woman's Suffrage, the Ladies' Auxiliary, the YWCA, or other organizations with which the League worked deemed necessary. Around this time, a Negro YWCA formed to allow the African-Americans a path for their patriotic efforts. While everything possible was being done for the white American soldiers, there was nothing for the African-Americans -- there were no clubs for recreation or rest, no canteens with specially prepared food. Although the League recognized that "something must be done for the Negro soldiers and sailors," they also agreed that they were not the ones to do something. But, with that in mind, the League and the war Camp Community Service opened a club for Negro soldiers and sailors on August 7, 1918.

Despite the racial barriers, the National League for Woman's Service was a tremendous organization for women's involvement in the World War I cause. When the workers had difficulty reaching the demands of the League, they never had much trouble recruiting more volunteers. The cooperation of the League with other national and local organizations and its novelty as the first large national establishment for women attracted a substantial membership that was able to teach the citizens on the home front how they could best serve their country during the war.